A Youth Well Squandered…

A Memoir of Caustic Nonfiction

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"Initials? what a douche…"

-NOTICE: Some names have been altered or obfuscated to avoid receiving another subpoena.

-The Common:

The first dead-giveaway is always the smell. Urban foot traffic and bellowing steam from the sunken manhole covers release this murky haze across the perimeter of the Boston Common not replicated by any natural fog. A sinful mixture of calcified rust and pot smoke permeates the brick walkways as tacky food cart vendors ardently shout over one another, peddling their grossly overpriced snacks and soft-drinks and bags of roasted cashews to an ocean of dopey millennial tourists.

"$9.89 for a lemonade?! WHAT A STEAL!!" they sputter, rummaging through their battered Chanel handbags and fishing out a crumpled twenty to break. All too familiar at this point. This is far from my first jaunt through the scenic Common, and from my recollection, it's just about the same as last time. The only difference, aside from impromptu sobriety, being the erratic changes in season like when the grass goes from a lively green to a jaundiced yellow and the leaves drop faster than a Flying Wallenda off their tightrope. Excluding those subtle tweaks to the environment, it's by far a mediocre display of nature, plain and simple. Now I may be going a bit too hard on this historic park, and perhaps I'm not considering all the crucial factors and pitfalls that go into its upkeep.

But any half-baked lummox with creamed corn for a brain can tell you the Common doesn't fully encapsulate what America has to offer, both botanically and faunistically. What draws people nowadays is the tried-and-true hobby of people watching, as everything and everyone are on full display making any outlandish scenario a possibility. In the "City of Starers" where everyone glares at you for no apparent reason, it's always a good bit of fun to stare right back and watch them wince in utter appallment. Take a stroll down any of the cigarette-butt lined paths and turn down your music just a little bit, you start to notice every group is represented. A baker's dozen homeless people line the spiked iron fence on every corner, jeering at passersby, rattling their transparent plastic solo-cups. Itching to pounce on any "Good Samaritan" and recite their fabricated sob story about being a "veteran" or how they're "trying to get some bus-fare home".

As someone who used to fall for this ruse countless times, always remember that no matter how much is given, they're never going to be satisfied. If anything, they get more confrontational if you do, stammering out the classic "That's it?!" line and getting all up in your shit. There's always that one renegade straggler who's clearly on something rummaging both arms-deep through a garbage pail, knocking empty aluminum cans and wadded-up Dunkin Donuts napkins across the pavement. Batting away the oncoming squirrels and pigeons, who are seizing the opportunity just like he is.

Next come the Jehovah's Witnesses and their perpetual pamphlet passing. I'll give credit where credit's due, they're smart enough to keep to themselves and only start their emphatic oration if you're dumb enough to actually humor them. This still doesn't stop a couple of jokers from pretending to be utterly enraptured by their tales of Jehovah, only to turn the corner and chuck the pamphlets in the garbage, snickering as they frolic back down the hill. Polar opposites to the strident social activists lining the bronze Brewer Fountain, poster boards adorned with tranquil images of fatal factory farming and brutalized aborted fetuses, depending on their political alignment. Their plastic partisan megaphones erupt mantra after mantra into the choking smog, hoping to punch through and draw in potential advocates and naysayers alike. It always feels like they're sifting for detractors more than supporters, to tee-off and blatantly validate their dogmatic opinions in a public setting.

"HEY BOSS-MAN!!" a voice suddenly shouted.

I was midway through taking a drag when I looked up. A lone hobo with the biggest puppy-dog eyes I'd ever seen, giving me a playful smile. Oh God, don't tell me…

"Can I bum a smoke off you, Boss-Man?" he asked, fluttering his eyelashes trying to look passive.

"Sorry my man, this is my last one right here." I bluffed, tucking my Lucky Strikes into my jacket pocket. He begrudgingly trudged back down the hill as I snuffed out my cig and fished out a fresh one. Just when I flicked my Bic, one of those mounted park rangers straddling a horse came clopping up to me.

"Excuse me sir, you can't smoke in the park."

Bastard.

In my humble opinion, the squirrels and rats have proven to be the most entertaining facet of the Common by a longshot. Much like the homeless, they lack any fundamental respect for social boundaries, only they can get away with it on account of being literal varmints. Leaping down from tree trunks onto a stoned couple's picnic blanket, snatching up a spent-roach and scurrying across the adjacent patch of grass. The rats are a lot like the mobs in Minecraft; they only come out at night when the foot traffic slows. I even saw someone teaching one disciplined squirrel all kinds of different tricks like I was at the National Dog Show. His reward was, you guessed it, a roasted cashew.

-The Ballad of Pedro:

Summer Camp wasn't the best experience for me, but it could've gone a hell of a lot worse. I guess if you want to get technical it was more of a "Day Camp" program, which is sort-of like Summer Camp, only you get to go home at three o'clock. Like traditional camp, the teenage camp counselors can only do so much until schisms inevitably rear their little snot-nosed heads. I was about twelve going on thirteen when I first laid eyes on that curly-haired kid sitting at the picnic bench under the aluminum flagpole. He looked kind of like Randall from Disney's *Recess* but wasn't hardly as much of an asshat… yet. My buddy told me his name was George, but for some godforsaken reason my adolescent brain thought it would be funny if I started calling him Pedro. I still can't pin down why exactly I started it, although he was wearing one of those "Vote for Pedro" shirts from Napoleon Dynamite, so maybe it was inevitable

one of us would light the powder keg. What I wasn't anticipating though, was the brutally visceral response from George because right from the get-go he wasn't having any of it.

It started off simply enough; we called him Pedro during casual conversations and shouted it at him from afar. One would typically try to broach stupid playground-taunts as level-headed as possible, be it through casual conversation or simply ignoring it. But Ol' George wasn't a man of formalities; he'd go all red in the face and screech whenever we'd approach, which only encouraged us to keep pushing him. When he got really steamed up he'd launch into his hallmark retort, delighting me and my pals to no end every time he whipped it out.

"MY. NAME'S. NOT. PEDRO!!!" he declared. "IT'S… GEOOOORRRGGEEE!!!!!"

We even got kids who'd never met him calling him Pedro, it was spreading like the mumps. Sadly, all good things must come to an end, and come one overcast morning we admittedly took it too far. Let me rephrase: my buddies Tyler and Elliot took things a bit too far; I was simply along for the ride so weigh responsibility at your own discretion. We were lounging about our little clubhouse on the tree line by the basketball court when George poked his shrewd little head through the brush.

"What are you guys doin' back here!?" he interrogated.

"None of your business, Pedro!" Tyler snipped, kicking dirt on George's shoes.

George stood tall, threatening to call over the Head-Counselor. "C'mon guys, don't make me tell Head-Counselor Kyle. I just wanna know what you're doin."

What were we doing back there? Well, when you're strapped for much to do outside of hiking and staring at the sun until mid-afternoon, you tend to make up stupid little games with your stupid little friends. One of these games involved boosting packets of Kraft Mayonnaise from the mess hall, spinning them nice and tight, and tossing them against large rocks hoping they would pop. We called it the "Mayo-Factory" and like a sweaty bunch of J.P. Morgans, you better believe we were territorial of our little base of operations.

"Think Fast, Pedro!" I said, whipping a mayo packet at him. It splattered against the tree behind him, and he went lobster-red. Breathing all heavy as he charged up.

"Oh man, here it comes," Elliot jeered.

"MYYY. NAME'SS. NOTTT. PEDROOOOOOOO!!!!" he erupted.

That's when he jumped on me, he didn't manage to knock me over but was clinging onto my chest with his dirt-lined fingernails. He swatted at me like a pissed off housecat and grabbed a clump of my hair, trying to wrench it from my scalp. Elliot grabbed him by the collar and yanked him off me, tossing him face first into the splattered tree. He bounced off the bark and tumbled to the ground, his Abercrombie sweatshirt smeared with fresh mayo.

"Oh shit," Tyler stuttered. "Here comes the rain."

George craned his head back and bleated out a wounded warrior cry as we booked it down the hill. A passing counselor taking his kids for a nature walk stumbled upon a prone George dry-heaving on the leaves clutching his abdomen. Elliot must've knocked the wind out of the poor kid. Head-Counselor Kyle pulled all three of us aside the next morning, but like acting Congressmen, we covered each other's asses and denied everything.

"Uh… I was playing volleyball," I lied.

"Tyler and I were in the gaga pit," Elliot lied.

Crickets, cicadas even, the silence was deafening. Kyle eventually hung his head in resignation and let us all go with a final warning. It didn't really matter much anyway. After the "Mayo-Incident", George's mother pulled him out of the Day-Camp Program. To this day, I know not where he is or who he's become since our brief time together, but if you're still kicking around out there, I implore you:

How's it hanging, Pedro?

-It's a Gas:

Like most disagreements amongst teenage boys, it always starts with a girl. The girl in this case being my older sister, who during third period health class was all my buddy Phil could talk about. I'm usually good when it comes to a slight ribbing, but when the guy just keeps going on and on about what he'd do to your sister if he had the chance, it tends to eat away at one's patience. Some wiseass named Louis whipped around to me, "You just gonna let him get away with all that, Nick?"

Now my mind was made up, come the end of the day I sped past my house and hopped on the interstate. I got off at the Rockaway Mall and crept my way through the Macy's towards the inner complex. Here we go, Spencer's; I swear it's always next to the Hot Topic. I brushed past the menagerie of Rick and Morty bongs and strap-on dildoes until I saw it hanging there on the rack, Liquid-Ass Fart Spray. Now it was time to scheme, and scheme I did. I could spray his locker, but I don't know his combo. I could spray his precious Ford Taurus, but they'll catch me on the security cameras. Wait, what about his backpack? It was settled: I bided my time for a good few days so he got all nice and complacent, thinking I simply let his verbal taunts go. At lunch, I waited for Phil to go to the bathroom before I moved in. Howard and Marlon were talking about tractors or Crown Vics or some shit, when I flashed them the bottle, riffing off something like "You guys better jump ship while you still can…"

They looked at me like I was holding a pipe bomb, scurrying off as I unzipped the backpack and let it rip. I drenched his notebooks and pencil case and his Google Chromebook until the fumes kicked in, and boy did it kick. It started off slow, but gradually you saw people's faces cringe and wince in disgust as a slight murmur echoed across the room. Then suddenly, half the cafeteria rushed to the other side like a rogue wave. Kids were shoving each other to the ground and ditching their gourmet cafeteria nachos as they stampeded for the far exit. All the while Phil comes sauntering back in exclaiming, "Jesus Christ, who shit their pants?"

The bell rang as I merged with the frantic crowd to make my daring escape, that's when I heard it…

“GODDAMMIT, THEY GOT MY FUCKIN’ BACKPACK!!”

I laughed all the way to Algebra. It was glorious. Everything had gone to plan. He carried all his crap around in a plastic trash bag for the rest of the day. It was late-December, so the underclassmen started calling him “The Grinch” from across the hall, which only served to fuel the shallow sense of victory. He inevitably heard through the grapevine that I was the smelly culprit, refusing to speak to me anymore. I tried texting him to hash it out but he stubbornly refused to apologize, saying I took things way too far and calling me insane. Calling me crazy got me mad in turn, and after a brief exchange of cursory insults we blocked each other on all fronts. Thinking that was the end of our friendship, the next day we had health class together and I was more than content with ghosting him for the next two years. That’s when the loudspeakers rang out “Lockdown! Lockdown! LOCKDOWN NOW!!”

Ahh shit, looks like we’re all gonna die.

All lockdown drills start off like this, but the hint of urgency in the announcer's voice rubbed us all the wrong way. Some classmates whose parents worked at the local P.D. confirmed our worst nightmare, this was not a drill. This was the real deal. Phil and I looked at each other and fervently shook hands, apologizing profusely for both our parts in this bullshit feud. The band kids were divvying out drumsticks, while Parker the Powerlifter held a fucking desk over his head, ready to launch it at the would-be gunman.

That’s when the S.W.A.T. Team kicked the door in, rifles drawn as they patted each of us down for potential weapons. The serial vapeists were pissing themselves, but the cops didn’t bother confiscating any of their nic-sticks, so they leveled out. It turns out some math teacher that everyone despised overheard some underclassmen arguing in the hallway, and one of them threatened to shoot the other. She called the main office which went into full panic mode, and the rest is history. They never found out who made the threat, but without them it’s likely me and Phil still wouldn’t be on speaking terms. All it took to rekindle our friendship was the inherent threat of death.